

EXHIBIT 21

Florida elections officials grapple with misinformation, myths



TALLAHASSEE — First came a contagion of disbelief in election results.

Then, a surge of public-records requests seeking details such as voting-system security processes.

Now, [fears of being arrested for voting](#).

Elections supervisors in Florida have grappled with these and other issues as they oversaw the state's August primary elections and prepared for the Nov. 8 general election.

The challenges have come amid supervisors' yearslong battle to convince voters that election processes aren't rigged, an issue that took root and spread after former President Donald Trump and his supporters insisted — and continue to maintain — that Democrat Joe Biden's 2020 victory was fraudulent.

Trump defeated Biden in Florida by more than three percentage points but, even in the Sunshine State, skepticism about how elections are operated continues to swirl.

And the [arrests in August of 20 people for alleged illegal voting](#) haven't helped, according to experts.

County supervisors of elections are combating a steady drumbeat of myths about election fraud from an increasingly wary public.

“Disinformation, or stuff people are just getting wrong and putting out there as gospel; misinformation, which is (incorrect) information they're purposely disseminating to confuse people; and malinformation, which has a kernel of truth but also is specifically skewed to mislead people. We see

that as our biggest challenge, is how do we find the people we need to reach,” Okaloosa County Supervisor of Elections Paul Lux told The News Service of Florida.

But communicating with the public can be difficult for elections officials, whose resources are limited.

“The people that are on the side of ‘the election was stolen,’ who either don’t want or aren’t interested in hearing the truth, they’re not on Facebook, so me posting all the stuff to cure misinformation to Facebook doesn’t help. There are plenty of people who are not on Facebook. There are plenty of people who never go to my website. I certainly don’t have the budget to advertise this. So all we can literally do is talk to the media to get our message out there where we can hope that it gets spread around by enough people to be effective,” Lux said.

Supervisors also have been inundated by voluminous public-records requests that appear to be part of a loosely coordinated campaign from activists in Florida and other states.

While the Florida Department of State works with county elections officials to ensure the accuracy of the state’s voter-registration database, the activists have launched their own efforts to try to ensure that ineligible people are stripped from voting rolls, at times going door to door to check on voters’ residency.

In Central Florida, the Lake County Election Integrity and Voter Protection Coalition, which is aligned with Florida4America.org, issued a white paper in August after performing an analysis of the 2020 general election based on records obtained from supervisors’ offices.

The group said it identified numerous “failures in our voting system” that allegedly resulted in voters casting ballots twice, out-of-state residents voting in Florida and “identity theft” of older voters. The Lake County group asked that the problems be investigated by the state’s new Office of Election Crimes and Security.

But Lake County Supervisor of Elections Alan Hays, a former state legislator, has accused Florida4America.org of confusing voters by encouraging them not to vote by mail.

Hays this month warned voters to ignore emails and phone calls from people he said “are claiming to attempt to clean up the voter rolls” in the region.

“The actions of these individuals are irresponsible and simply contribute to the erosion of voter confidence and misinformation which continues to plague our elections system,” Hays, a Republican, said in an Oct. 4 voter alert.

While Florida has broad open-records laws, much of the information being sought, including from people and groups outside of the state, is shielded from release to the public.

“They’re demanding, essentially, the equivalent of the architect of a nuclear plant and the usernames and passwords of all the security surrounding it,” Leon County Supervisor of Elections Mark Earley told the News Service. “They want the names that are allowed to log in. They want copies of all the voting system hard drives. ... It’s a road map for hacking. That stuff is protected at the state and federal level.”

Earley, who is president of the Florida Supervisors of Elections association, and his colleagues believe the public-records requests could be an attempt to set the stage for post-election legal challenges.

Orange County Supervisor of Elections Bill Cowles, who was first elected in 1996, also suggested that voters who have moved to Florida might have brought mistrust of elections procedures with them. Voting regulations vary from state to state, he noted.

“The big issue for us in Florida is that people have come from elsewhere, and I guess the big thing is ... there is no one law for elections. The U.S. Constitution sets the date for the general election, but then it leaves it up to the 50 states to write their own election code,” he said. “So when people come in here and start telling me what happened in Georgia, I say, ‘Whoa. We don’t even use the same equipment they have in Georgia.’ ... A lot of times, it’s us reassuring the local voters of how our process works, and they get it.”

Meanwhile, the Office of Elections Crimes and Security, established by the Legislature at Gov. Ron DeSantis’ behest this spring, could have a chilling effect on voter turnout. Voting rights advocates are concerned that the creation of the office could reinforce unfounded allegations about election fraud.

DeSantis held a news conference with Secretary of State Cord Byrd, who oversees the elections security office, and law enforcement officials on Aug. 18 to announce that 20 felons had been arrested for allegedly voting illegally in 2020. The governor pledged that more arrests would be coming.

Videos of some of the arrests began circulating this month, possibly contributing to eligible voters’ newly founded fears.

“I have not encountered in the past this many voters calling, concerned that they may be prosecuted or what have you for voter fraud. And these are all eligible voters that have contacted me,” Earley said.

The suspicions about the 2020 election, purported voting irregularities and allegations of illegal voting are part of a nationwide trend, said Brad Ashwell, state director of the nonprofit group All Voting Is Local. That trend was perhaps most visible when Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021.

“Voter suppression has historically been focused on suppressing certain voters from voting. Now it’s shifted to the process,” Ashwell said. “If the election doesn’t go your way, then it’s the process. It isn’t a bad candidate. They’ve focused on calling question to the process and subverting the results. That’s what we’re really concerned about. As we saw on Jan. 6, there’s really no limit to what they’ll do if they’re dissatisfied with the results.”